

**Remarks of the Honorable Henry J. Hyde
Before the Full Committee
“Democracy in Latin America: Successes, Challenges and the Future”**

Wednesday, June 21, 2006

The late *Newsweek* columnist, Meg Greenfield, once said that, “Everyone is for Democracy in principle. It’s only in practice that the thing gives rise to stiff opposition.”

Democracy is, indeed, a widely-shared hope by peoples around the world, but its realization often faces enormous obstacles and continuing challenges. In today’s hearing, the Committee will explore the current fortunes of democracy in Latin America, examine some of the factors behind its successes and failures, and attempt to understand what the future might hold.

By any measure, the spread of democracy in Latin America over recent decades has been remarkable. Twenty-five years ago, 16 of the 35 nations in our hemisphere were ruled by authoritarian leaders. Under these regimes, millions suffered significant oppression and widespread violations of human and civil rights, with little or no ability to influence the governments that ruled over them.

Today, through the diligent efforts of visionary leaders in Latin America, and their steadfast supporters in the United States and other democratic nations worldwide, democracy has now taken root in 34 of the 35 nations in our hemisphere. Although political freedom in many of these countries is often precarious, only the regime in Cuba continues to tightly shackle its people.

The spread of freedom has had profound results for the lives of the people in the region. In countries once plagued by civil war and unrest, the advent of democracy has been accompanied by a dramatic enhancement of security. Where juntas and violent coups once were the norm, free, fair and transparent elections have become common. This year, the people in 14 countries will go to the polls to choose their leaders, both national and local. Following these elections, peaceful transfers of power within established constitutional frameworks will take place. Although some of our neighbors are still struggling to resolve lingering issues left over from the old regimes, millions throughout the hemisphere who were once excluded from the political process are now enjoying the basic human and civil rights that democracy guarantees.

While some nations in the hemisphere have developed enduring democratic institutions, many others still struggle. Often, these institutions are weak and unable to meet even the basic demands placed upon them, such as establishing and enforcing a fair tax code, instituting an effective judicial system, providing reliable police services and other needs which we in this country take for granted.

Embracing democratic principles and building democratic institutions are the essential first steps in the establishment of political freedom. But the long-term sustainability of any democracy will depend on the ability of its elected leaders to fight the entrenched corruption,

political favoritism, and greed that all too often pervade the judiciary, police, and other agencies of the government. There has been considerable progress in these areas in many countries, but much remains to be done, and in some, problems are worsening. It is, in short, a testing time for democracy in Latin America.

Promoting democracy throughout the world has long been a central element of U.S. foreign policy. Nowhere is this more important than in our own hemisphere, where the spread of political freedom has reinforced stability, enhanced human rights, allowed economies to expand, and encouraged cooperation within and between countries on many subjects that once were the source of conflict. That progress is now threatened in many areas, and there have been a number of significant setbacks. We in this country have little choice but to assist those struggling to preserve their freedoms against the rising challenges. Self-interest alone is a sufficient reason to do so. But an equally powerful motivation is fidelity to our ideals and our historic commitment to promoting liberty around the world.

However, regardless of how great our desire to help, there are limits to what we can do. As Mohandas Gandhi once said, "The Spirit of Democracy cannot be imposed from without. It has to come from within." That is the test Latin America now faces: How deeply has democracy sunk its roots, how far will the people of the region go to defend their own freedom?

I thank our distinguished panel of witnesses, and I look forward to their testimony.

And now I turn to my friend and colleague, Mr. Lantos, for any remarks he may wish to make.